

The University of Chicago

CRITICISM
OF REASON IN CONTEMPORARY
THEOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED
TO THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR
OF PHILOSOPHY

JUNE, 1941

By
GEORGE RUDOLPH GORDH

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

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Times without number the present has been called an age of unreason. Its literature and its art, its psychologies and sociologies, its interpretations of history and its philosophies have been dominated by an emphasis upon the irrational in human life and in the universe. Religious thinking and programs for religious action have become impatient with rational formulations, and have sought their basis in vitalistic pragmatism, mysticisms, or both combined. More recently the Barthian theology has challenged human reason in the name of revelation and found sufficient sympathy in the Zeitgeist to become a powerful influence in the religious scene. It has brought to light another aspect of the time's spirit, however: a movement toward stability and certainty. This has been the occasion for a renewed interest in theology. And the present study discovers its occasion in the interrelating of two questions: that of reason and the irrational, and that . of theology and its method.

I

That which appears to be common to all definitions of theology is an assertion that it is related, somehow, to a religious group and a religious tradition. All religious groups, further, have some sort of theology. If this relationship is once granted, it is scarcely necessary to press the point that some irrational elements must be present in theology. Its symbols must be functionally related to the religious behavior of the group, and their pragmatic dimension, as a consequence, will be an important consideration for their usefulness. Social psychology and sociology of knowledge are disciplines which bring to particular focus the effect of irrational elements in the shaping of the ideology of groups. There is also a rational aspect of group belief. By it the group maintains itself, passes on to its children the convictions by which it lives, adjusts itself to the ideational patterns

of outgroups, and guides its own religious experiences into patterns which are meaningful. This group-belief is not the belief of any specific individual, nor is it the common denominator of all the beliefs of any community. It is rather the belief which characterizes the "social mind."¹ It may well be called "collective theology." The word "methodology" simply does not apply to it.

It depends for its success and its continuance upon the work of individuals, the theologians, whose task it is to substantiate the belief of the group. They propose to define its objects of religious devotion, guide its religious living, explicate its modes of knowing, and relate its thought to ideational structures current in the culture. In the strictest sense they become theologians only when the group uses their work in the interests of its own religious life. There are theologians only post facto; most become theologians only after they are dead.

Still there are intentional theologians, men who set about quite consciously to contribute to the theological well being of their group. They may write directly for the consumption of the religious public expositions or criticisms of matters which are part of the collective theology of the time; this is the task of "popular theology." It must recognize the irrational elements which are present in the collective theology and make its adjustment to the latter in terms of them. Thus from social psychology the theologian must learn that a group has certain needs and interests, and that these change with passing time. His theological writing must be "experience centered" rather than academic. Sociology of knowledge reminds him that theological thinking resembles political thinking in that it involves the thinker as an actor in the process within which he carries on his intellectual activity. Semiotic emphasizes the significance of the pragmatic dimension of words for religious living, and particularly for group experience in religion. There will consequently be a mythical element in the terminology of popular theology; words will be used to bring the group into relation with those realities which are most impor-

¹Shailer Mathews, "Theology and the Social Mind," The Biblical World, XLVI (1915), 204; and see The Atonement and the Social Process (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1930) and Christianity and the Social Process (New York: Harper and Bros., 1934).

tant, but which are not accurately designated (sometimes not designated at all) by the terms used. These irrational elements make it impossible to speak in any specific terms of a "methodology" of popular theology. There must be, indeed, a methodology implicit in it, but explication of it requires terms and niceties which popular theology cannot tolerate. When the popular theologian is pressed to make clear his methodological presuppositions, he must speak a language which is precise and rigorous. Popular theology demands another type of theology.

"Philosophical theology" is the extreme to which the "sentiment of rationality" in the religious group drives the theological enterprise. Here the irrational elements which are involved in the biotic and emotive aspects of group experience are left behind. Distinctions are precise, language is used with utmost definition, and no attention is given to its pragmatic effects. However, philosophical theology still bears a relation to religion, and to the specific religious tradition in which it appears. It is determined by three references: From the scientific study of religion it derives its focus of interest, the philosophy of value. From the Christian tradition it derives an element best described as form--a general description of the relationship which it is held should exist between the object of devotion and the worshipper. It is not necessary to insist that any form is the Christian form, but it is possible to note a form which is important in the classical literature of Christianity. This form is the point of contact between philosophical and popular theology; because of it translation is possible from one to the other. From philosophy it derives its method. This should be a rigorous philosophical method, with criteria for truth and error, universal validity, and the possibility for intersubjective verification. The particular philosophic method is not designated by the description of theology.

One method, and that which seems to the writer to be the desirable one, is that of rational empiricism. When applied to philosophical theology it is seen to concern itself with the determination of the Best Discoverable. It will have a large place for reason. But it will recognize also an irrational element: its constant reference to and control by an expected datum.

Two irrational elements, then, must be noted by theology as thus delineated. Popular theology must note carefully the ir-

rational elements in the words which it uses; philosophical theology must note carefully the significance for it of the given.

II

Certain of the points which have been mentioned will become clearer in the light of an examination of other treatments of the place of reason in theology. Attention is turned particularly to Emil Brunner and to the Lundensian theologians, Gustaf Aulen, Ragnar Bring, and Anders Nygren. Both types of thought have treated the problem of interest at length, making clear methodological presuppositions and dealing explicitly with the problem of reason and the irrational. Both represent significant traditions in Christian thinking and important trends in the contemporary scene. Both are critical of certain irrational trends in contemporary religious thought and thus bring these into the discussion through reaction. Moreover, the two viewpoints differ significantly at certain points, so that certain aspects of the problem come more vividly to light because of the differences. Emil Brunner's point of view may be summarized thus: human reason cannot make its way to the objects of Christian concern; a Word must come from the Creator; this Word has an intellectual element, which is explicated in theology; but the Word is meaningful only in terms of a peculiar relationship which sustains it. The Lundensian point of view may be summarized thus: human reason cannot make its way to the Eternal, which is the object of religious concern; various religions defined the eternal and the character of its relation to man; theology is the attempt to discover through historical study the peculiarly Christian definition of the Eternal.

Both Brunner and the Lundensians hold that reason cannot make its way to the objects of religious concern because it cannot establish a philosophy of the absolute or the eternal. The Brunnerian argument is in Kantian terms, appealing to the constitutive activity of mind, the limitation of knowledge by an X which can never become a concept, and the hidden axioms which beset any empiricism. The Lundensian argument is also critical, gaining added strength from positivistic analyses. Metaphysics is always self-contradictory, and no route which can be dignified by the name of "knowledge" can exceed the cosmological-anthropological sphere. On these grounds the positions under study set aside the possibility

of establishing a philosophical theology. But the objections to rational ways of attaining to the objects of religious concern simply do not apply to the position which has been set forth in this study. The Absolute and the Eternal have been of interest to religion secondarily, as by-products of its relation to values; the bare conceptual Absolute or Eternal does not concern it at all. But the Best Discoverable may be determined and examined by means which do not exceed rational investigation. Knowledge need not exceed the cosmological-anthropological sphere in order to be "religious" knowledge. Empiricism is constantly examining its own axioms, and to deny that the X can become an object of study is an unwarranted rationalism. Thus when the focus of interest of philosophical theology is placed within the philosophy of value, the problem of reason is differently oriented; it becomes a different problem.

This difference will come to light in the consideration of other attacks on reason which are discovered in the thinkers under study. Both schools of thought give much attention to the peculiarity of the ethical. In Brunner man's sense of obligation is regarded as a mark of the divine creation, and is held to preclude the possibility of a descriptive view of man. The Lundensians place ethical judgments in a category which is not amenable to rational systematization. The statement, "This is good," refers to an ideal, a definition of the good; but every ideal is beyond the possibility of theoretic determination. Now it is granted that significant attacks upon certain types of "rationalism" are brought to light by the Brunnerian and Lundensian statements. The block universe of idealism is not compatible with ethical seriousness. The relativity of ethical judgments must be noted, and any philosophic attempt to deal with the problem of value must deal with it. But the empiricist treatment of values shifts the emphasis in questions of ethics, and shifts the role of reason in the exposition of a value theory. Ideals have reference to choices rather than choices to ideals. It is readily granted that ethical decision sometimes requires action before all the elements entering into the choice are brought to light. It is granted also that choices are badly made, and that different perspectives bring differing valuations. But these considerations do not place values beyond empirical investigation, nor do they place man in an unknowable category. If there is no content to the word "good,"

then an ethic which bids man seek the well-being of his fellows is rather pointless; love cannot be utterly blind, if it is to be at all meaningful.

Evil is regarded by both Brunner and the Lundensians as an insuperable obstacle to the interpretation of the world in theistic terms without recourse to super-rational sources of knowledge. But here again the orientation of the problem in terms of the Absolute misleads the investigation. The Best Discoverable is admittedly finite. The fact of evil--as a character of situations rather than as an "entity," as Brunner seems to treat it--is part of the world as discovered. But there is also in the world a Process which transmutes evils into good.

Both Brunner and the Lundensians again insist that rational theologies substitute the "idea" of God for God. In Brunner there is repeated emphasis upon God as "real and personal," and Aulen constantly reminds his readers that Christianity has a "picture of God" rather than a "concept of God." At this point the present viewpoint would agree with these thinkers against certain forms of theology which have been highly significant in historical Christianity. It would admit that the limitations which apply to all empirical knowing apply to the knowledge of God. But it would insist upon the concreteness of the religious object. The God who is knowable is a God who acts in the world, and whose work is seen.

III

Brunner's insistence upon the incompetence of reason in theology is paralleled by a vehement denunciation of alleged irrational ways to God, mystical or vitalistic. The Word which reveals God to man is a mediate communication between persons. Faith has a content which is intellectual in nature. Faith, indeed, is "subject reason," and reason is "penultimate in faith."¹ Consequently theology can have a direct relationship to faith; in its dogmatic form it is the explication of the rational implications of the knowledge given in faith.² There is a peculiar way of know-

¹See Emil Brunner, Man in Revolt, translated by Olive Wyon (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939), p. 244; The Word and the World (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931), p. 34.

²Dogmatics is the first task of theology; its second is to

ing in Christianity, and it does not parallel the subject-object type of knowing which is characteristic of Greek philosophy. Christianity knows of a "gewordene Wahrheit" which is imparted in a confrontation. It knows of no God in abstraction; God-in-relation reveals himself to man-in-relation, and the means through which this is accomplished is an Erzählung rather than a proposition.¹ The Word is revealed in a historical event; this is the repudiation of human reason. For reason seeks always the most general; revelation say that the most general, the eternal, has been revealed in a specific, contingent event.

The function of reason in theology relates itself to this faith with a content. Reason receives a message which already has a rational element. Reason explicates the message. Thus it seeks to discover the formal structure of the Bible hidden within the historical accident. Thus higher criticism does not invalidate the setting forth of "Biblical psychology." Reason corrects theology. The formulations of the past have been the work of men, and often have confused human matters with things divine. Historical and scientific criticism aid in purifying the message of elements which do not properly belong to it. Reason tests theological doctrines by examining them in the light of the central concept of revelation. Reason thus is very important in theology. By it religion can say "this and not that."

However theology must never lose sight of the peculiar epistemological principles of the faith which have been noticed. A theology which claims truth for itself as theology is a monstrosity to the Christian faith. The matter at stake is far more serious than that. For the church lives by a message, and that message is constantly under threat of corruption. The main task of theology is practical; its duty is to keep clean the fountain of the church's life.²

enter into discussion (polemical when necessary) with human experience in general. The above attack on reason was part of the second task of theology, eristics. See especially "Die andere Aufgabe der Theologie," Zwischen den Zeiten, VII (1929), 255-76.

¹Emil Brunner, Wahrheit als Begegnung (Berlin: Furche Verlag, 1938).

²See especially Emil Brunner "Theologie und Kirche," Zwischen den Zeiten, VIII (1930), 397-420.

Against this delineation of the basis of theology no argument can be directed. Its strength lies in its blatant irrationalism. And this is one of the services which it can perform even for those who disagree with it: it can bring to focus the fact that a revelationist theology must be a blatantly irrationalist theology. Theologies which argue that revelation is a reasonably expected occurrence and either by making revelation unnecessary--since if it is already known what God is, what is added to this knowledge by revelation?--or by denying what they assumed at the beginning--that man knows what God is. Brunner further differentiates theology from mysticism: he insists that what differentiates Christianity from another revelational religion is not the revelation by the Christian element.

Philosophy, however, has not always attended to unassailable arguments. And certain considerations may be urged against Brunner which are worth noting, even if they admittedly do not prove him wrong. Confrontations are not limited to the Christian tradition, and to insist upon their veridical character within one historical stream only is to be rather arbitrary in one's treatment of truth. The idea of "Word" in Brunner's thought is made to bear a rather heavy burden. It is easy to insist that a word is a mediate communication between persons, but to leap then to a Divine Other who utters a word is rather too much. The communication gives, but does not give, a message. Thus Brunner seems constantly to be caught between a high degree of sophistication and an attempt to return to primitive naivete.

IV

The Lundensian treatment of the nature of theology is in terms of science; even in the parallelisms with Brunner which have been noted there is a different orientation. The Swedish thinkers intend to avoid metaphysics rather than to set up an alternate metaphysics. They feel that Brunner introduces too much of the metaphysical in his thinking, and that his placing of theology within the faith-complex endangers the theological enterprise. Theology for the Lundensians is a theoretic science, dealing with observable phenomena.

It is necessary first, therefore, to indicate the nature of the observed material. Critical philosophy can be of assis-

tance in this task by analysing experience and criticizing judgments. These are discovered to be of four types: one theoretic, and three--aesthetic, ethical, and religious--a-theoretic. A-theoretic judgments, not judgments in the strict sense of the word, must refer to some preliminary definition in terms of which they have meaning. Each category, therefore, proposes a categorical question, and this question must find its answer in history. Thus the categorical question of religion is "What is the nature of the Eternal," and each historical religion furnishes its own answer.¹ Theology looks to history to discover what is the properly Christian answer to the categorical question of religion. For the Christian religion, like every other, is a structure with center and periphery; its center is determined by its grundmotiv, and this is its answer to the categorical question. Thus theology is purely theoretic and objective. It may use reason without stint, and it does not propose any irrational ways of knowing its object. It realizes, of course, that irrational elements have entered into the formulation of doctrine at particular times, and it does not set forth any dogmatic system as final. Only the quality of Christianity is given once for all. Further, the grundmotiv is not a logical idea, nor is a set of doctrines to be judged by the principle of contradiction.²

The confusing thing about this program, however, is that it becomes apparent as soon as it is put into operation that it answers its question before it asks it. When the history of Christian thought is interrogated, it actually discloses other

¹See Anders Nygren, Religiöst Apriori (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1921) for analysis of the religious a priori; of particular importance for the analysis here are Nygren, Dogmatikens Vetenskapliga Grunläggning (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1922), Filosofisk och Kristen Etik (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1923); Ragnar Bring, Till Fragan om den Systematiska Teologiens Uppgift (Lund: H. Ohlssons Boktryckeri, 1933), Gustaf Aulen, Den Allmänneliga Kristna Tron (Stockholm, Svenska Kyrkans Diakonistyrrelses Bokförlag, 1924).

²A second irrational element comes into theology (though not directly into theological method) through the discovery of the peculiarly Christian motiv: Agape. For Agape must be revealed, it cannot be discovered. Unchristian motiva are present in legalistic and mystical and metaphysical systems. Revelation is necessary therefore, though it is not treated as a way of "knowing." It is hard to see what it can be if it is not a way of "knowing," and if it is a way of knowing the objections to Brunner's revelationism apply to it.

motives than that which the Lundensians regard as the authentically Christian. Within the Christian stream it is necessary to separate the Christian from the un-Christian. The most that it seems possible to say concerning the Agape-motiv is that it is one of the classic motives of Christianity, and it may well be the most important. But there is no way of proving such an assertion upon historical grounds.

V

It is necessary to return now to the consideration concerning the nature of theology which was set forth at the beginning of the discussion, and to apply certain things which have been gained from the study of the thinkers noted.

Philosophical theology, it was said, is guided by three references. The first of these is a focus of interest: the philosophy of values. It has been argued that the Best Discoverable is the concern of religion, and to attain it does not necessitate the abandonment of the limits of rational inquiry. With the Lundensians it is agreed that knowledge cannot exceed the cosmological-anthropological sphere; against them it is urged that a philosophy of values may be set up which has objective validity.¹

The second reference is that of form. And here the Lundensians have a definite contribution to make. For it can be seen that a particular definition of the general character of the relationship between the object of religious devotion and the worshipper may be set forth without defining the object in all its aspects. Thus the fundamental structure of a Christian ethic in terms of theistic naturalism can be the same as that of Brunner's Divine Imperative: the presence of good and evil together is noted in the world, the devotion of the Christian is to the good in each partial good, but it transcends this devotion through a higher commitment to a Good which goes beyond each present good. But the work of God is identifiable in naturalism.

The third reference of philosophical theology is to philosophic method, and the method which has been upheld in the preceding discussion is that of rational empiricism. Here is the

¹I should follow Prof. Henry N. Wieman primarily in the treatment of value, and the delineation of theistic naturalism.

crucial point in the use of reason in theology. In its simplest terms the function of reason may be described as that of the focussing of attention. All its other functions--clarifying, exploring of possibilities, drawing distinctions, operations of various kinds--may be subsumed under this one. And when reason has focussed attention, it has reached its limit, accomplished all that it can.

Popular theology possesses irrational elements which are not of concern to philosophical. It must revere the emotional attachments of the religious group.¹ It is, as Brunner puts it, essentially practical, and it exists for the church. For this reason myths serve an important function in it. But the myths of Christianity must be related to processes which are observable in the universe. If they are not so related, the connection of popular with philosophical theology is broken, and theology is left to propose vagaries and becomes utterly irresponsible. Thus a limitation is placed upon the irrational as it functions in popular theology, and it is essentially the same control which is placed upon philosophical theology. Both are controlled by reference to predictable sequences of events--matters of fact.

¹Prof. Edwin E. Aubrey has noted particularly the emotional elements which must be noted by the theological enterprise. See, e.g., Man's Search for Himself (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1940), p. 42; Present Theological Tendencies (New York: Harper and Bros., 1936), p. 233.

